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New path?

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BRETT FRENCH

Billings Gazette

A plan to share stewardship of Yellowstone National Park's bison between tribes and federal agencies is being proposed by a Montana bison advocacy group.

Buffalo Field Campaign's executive director, James Holt Sr., a member of the Nez Perce Tribe, mailed a letter on June 16 to 31 tribes proposing a summit in November at Fort Hall, Idaho, to discuss the idea.

"The time has come for Tribal Nations to come together, to share our hearts and unite on behalf of Yellowstone Buffalo," Holt wrote.

The group said in a press release that including tribes in bison management would be the "beginning of 'true reparations' for the long-standing practice of cultural genocide, or ethnocide, that is still being perpetuated by the cattle industry to preserve their monopoly on public lands forage in the West."

The statement goes on to specifically target the Montana Department of Livestock for its involvement in bison management, the only wildlife species in the state overseen by the agency.

AND MORE

Dallas Gudgell, who sits on the Buffalo Field Campaign board and is a member of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, said the gathering and bison proposal is a first step toward an even larger objective — tribal co-stewardship that also includes wolves and grizzly bears, with the goal of increasing protections for the keystone species.

The group is hoping that a growing recognition of traditional ecological knowledge will provide momentum, Gudgell said, despite the obvious headwinds the group will face from state officials.

The Buffalo Field Campaign was founded in 1997 by Mike Mease and Lakota elder Rosalie Little Thunder. The proposal to co-manage wildlife species has come as "tribal voices" have been elevated at the nonprofit, Gudgell said. After founding the nonprofit, Mease spent the next 12 years living in a tepee



PHOTOS BY JACOB W. FRANK/NPS

Yellowstone National Park's bison herd is a conservation success story. Now an advocacy group is calling for tribes to help manage them.

near Yellowstone's West Entrance as he fought — through litigation, advocacy and education — to protect park bison from shipment to slaughter.

AT ISSUE

In his letter, Holt called the current management of Yellowstone bison politicized. Montana manages the species unlike any other wildlife because they may carry brucellosis, a disease that can cause pregnant cattle to abort. As a result, bison are allowed to roam only so far outside of Yellowstone in Montana before being killed or herded back into the park.

Elk, which also carry brucellosis, are not similarly managed, although the state does track infections and attempts to keep elk and cattle separate in the spring.

Scientists believe the disease is most easily transferred from an infected pregnant animal's birthing tissue and fluids. Spring is when elk and bison give birth to their calves.

Yellowstone officials, under a court-mediated settlement with Montana in 2000, agreed to reduce bison populations

to limit their presence outside the park. To that end, the National Park Service captured Yellowstone bison and shipped them to slaughter for years, with the meat provided to cooperating tribes. The framework for the program was outlined under the Interagency Bison Management Plan, or IBMP.

In 2005, the state of Montana began allowing limited bison hunting on public lands outside the park. The following year, the state recognized the Nez Perce Tribe's treaty rights to hunt Yellowstone bison. At the time, then Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath said the state wasn't granting the Nez Perce the right to hunt. Instead, Montana was "pre-empted by superior federal law from interfering with the rights certain tribes have from their treaties with the United States."

TRANSFER

More recently, Yellowstone officials have moved away from shipping bison to slaughter and are instead capturing bison for brucellosis testing. This winter, 282 bison were segregated for

the program. Bison that pass repeated tests while in quarantine are eventually allowed to be shipped to the Fort Peck Tribe. From there the bison can be trucked to tribal partners through what's called the Bison Conservation Transfer Program.

Montana will not allow the transport of live bison that have not completed quarantine protocols, unless they are going to slaughter. Since 2019, the Bison Conservation Transfer Program sent about 300 Yellowstone bison to 23 tribes in 12 states.

Although the Park Service reduced its shipments of bison to slaughter, this past winter members of eight tribes shot around 1,100 bison that migrated outside the park's boundaries (hunting is not allowed inside the park). In all — including hunting, culling and wounding loss — the Park Service estimated the loss of bison this winter at around 2,300 animals. Yellowstone's fall bison population was estimated at about 6,000 animals.

"Tribes must not settle for 6,000 wild buffalo when management should target populations of 50,000 or more," Holt wrote. "Tribes must not settle for a few thousand barren acres outside Yellowstone National Park, when buffalo should have access to 8 million adjacent acres of suitable habitat on open and unclaimed federal lands."

The unclaimed federal lands Holt referred to are mostly Forest Service acreage adjoining Yellowstone. In Montana, that would include portions of the 1.8 million-acre Custer Gallatin National Forest to the north and west of the park.

Adding another wrinkle to the whole discussion, Yellowstone's wild bison are being considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency cited several reasons for providing protection, including: "loss of migration routes, lack of tolerance for bison outside Yellowstone National Park, and habitat loss."

MEMO

Included with Holt's invitation to tribal leaders was a

memo outlining Buffalo Field Campaign's legal basis for its idea. The memo pointed to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland's order in March recognizing the importance of wild bison restoration on prairie grasslands through collaboration among state and federal agencies, landowners and tribes. Haaland is the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary. She is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna.

Haaland's order was criticized in March by Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte. In a letter to the secretary, Gianforte said, "Montana is a sovereign entity that exercises full authority over the management of bison within its borders. The utter lack of meaningful engagement from USFWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and NPS (U.S. National Park Service), and now the issuance of S.O. 3410, seems to demonstrate DOI's ill-advised and predecisional commitment to forcing any bison agenda it sees fit."

His letter goes on to call the park's bison "diseased" and the animals' increasing population as leading the Yellowstone ecosystem into "ecological crisis."

In May, the Bozeman Daily Chronicle obtained documents showing the National Park Service was concerned in 2022 that Montana may "litigate if Yellowstone bison were not vaccinated and aggressively culled toward a target population of 3,000 animals."

In 2016, bison were named the national mammal, further elevating discussions and work to preserve and restore a species that for thousands of years was essential to Native Americans' livelihood on the Great Plains. The animals were nearly extirpated by Euro-Americans in the 1800s before conservation actions were undertaken.

Yellowstone's bison are a result of that conservation success, one of the few herds to remain relatively wild. Their genetics are also valued because they have only a tiny percentage — less than 1% — of cattle genes, a remnant of ranchers' attempts to cross-breed the animals in the early 1900s.